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ABSTRACT

Advertising in the mass media contains a wide variety of psychological, emotional, and cultural messages. In basic skills and English-as-a-Second-Language writing instruction, ads can be used to exemplify writing models presented in class. Basic skills students often come to writing classes discouraged or prepared for failure, and the structure of most writing textbooks is confusing and/or patronizing. By contrast, advertisements provide real-life illustrations of argument, cause and effect, and persuasion. They can be particularly effective, when carefully chosen, in teaching foreign students. Learners can collect ads containing examples of concepts being taught in class, idioms, and figurative language. Because they contain persuasive information, ads may be easier to decipher than many other materials. Analysis of ads also lends itself to collaborative learning. Ads are readily available in a wide range of forms, some with intentional grammatical or spelling errors. Comparison of advertising for similar products across audiences or media (e.g., magazine versus television), analysis of layout and placement in a publication, and examination of content and appearance are useful exercises. With training, students can learn to think critically, distinguish faulty from sound logic, and analyze the influence ads have on the consumer. (MSE) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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Advertisements in the Basic Skills Writing Class

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Advertisements in the Basic Skills Writing Class

Abstract

Advertisements were used with positive results as teaching tools in basic writing, English as a second language, and GED classes at an urban community college. Advertisements, a ubiquitous and non-threatening resource, motivated students to think critically and to analyze the influence that ads have on the consumer. Not only students in developmental education courses but also those in regular college writing classes learned to distinguish faulty logic from sound and convincing arguments by analyzing magazine and television ads.

Advertisements in the Basic Skills Writing Class

INTRODUCTION

The media, a resource that surrounds us all, is a rich source of educational tools. One such rich source is advertising, both print and electronic, which provides an extensive variety of psychological and emotional public appeals. Since students are exposed to advertising daily, the approach each ad takes can be used to exemplify the writing models the composition teacher is demonstrating in class. For example, while leafing though magazines and newspapers, watching television, or listening to the radio, consumers (of which college students represent an influential number) are exposed to various advertising techniques, such as the bandwagon approach, snob appeal, false analogy, begging the question, the ad hominem appeal, and other forms of faulty logic. With training, students can learn to determine how much a product's attributes are exaggerated by writers who are experienced in understanding the market (that is, the consumer) and who can subtly manipulate words and images to stimulate the consumer's urge to buy. By using ads in the classroom, students sharpen their critical thinking skills and gain self-esteem as they analyze the media around them for examples of false logic.

The following sections outline how advertisements can be used (in conjunction with the course text) to teach basic writers grammar, rhetoric and, in the case of foreign students, culture.

Textbooks

Textbooks for basic writing, GED, and ESL classrooms tend to present material in a uniform way. For example, students are taught to brainstorm ideas, sort through and organize those ideas, and write a coherent and grammatically correct composition following a variety of writing models. Advertisements, a ubiquitous source of ideas, can be used as tools in teaching students the same grammar and writing concepts. Ads, to which students are exposed daily via print, television, radio, and direct mail, are realia that can generate enthusiasm for writing in the basic skill classroom.

Basic Writers

GED students and other basic writers, who generally have experienced a long history of educational failure and who are often threatened by the idea of writing, need to experience success in their classes. English classes can be discouraging for these students because words and sentences are sometimes taught in isolation, separate from meaning and especially impenetrable by students from nontraditional backgrounds. Many basic writers come from a community where their language is different from the teacher's and therefore the norm. Teachers sometimes react to the papers of basic writers by attacking the surface errors with red marker, rather than by commenting on the good ideas deep within the composition (Henning p. 677).

Basic writers are already well aware that they make many errors. The preoccupation with writing error-free papers either

paralyzes them or causes them to sacrifice valuable ideas because they are afraid to write; sometimes they take inordinate amounts of time to complete a few sentences (Shaughnessy p. 7). Some basic writers are so obsessed with the desire to "correct" papers that they forsake good ideas. Still others are silenced by th- ;tern impression they hold of the error-seeking grammatician, the vigilant goddess Grammatica from the Middle Ages (Rose pp. 1-2) who, poised with red pen, is ready to strike out every error in the "offending" student's paper.

Another factor concerns how engaged students are in the task. Nystrand and Gamoran studied writing classes to determine how involved students were in the composing process. Those students who appeared to become deeply involved in discussion and thinking about a topic exhibited more critical thinking skills than their classmates, who did not appear engaged (p. 261).

The structure of some writing textbooks is confusing at best and patronizing at worst. Henning remarks that "the assumptions are that our adult students do not know how to think and that minds are structured like machines that process information" (. 677). By using advertisements to illustrate concepts from the course textbook, teachers can motivate students to brainstorm ideas and present coherent arguments for their opinions. Readers and writers construct meaning from prior knowledge, their experiences and their linguistic purpose (Ackerman p. 133). Ads are a part of "real" life that surrounds us all in every medium; students can balance their own particular point of view with the requirements of writing

for an audience. Shaughnessy points out that ads are a positive medium for students to work with due to "those hours of TV and radio and movies and ads where standard forms blend with all that is alluring in society" (p. 10).

Smagorinsky studied the use of writing models to teach argument, cause and effect, and persuasion. The pupils he studied had trouble learning to write in different modes simply by following model essays. He stressed the need to brainstorm and free write and to get involved in the process of writing. However, in the classroom, that is not always the most expedient way to teach writing. Most important is that students have a chance to think critically. Otherwise, they are just trying to fill in "slots" of an essay without carefully thinking about what material goes into the slots (p. 359). Students who are taught to write formulaic essays may produce what Neel describes as a composition that has a beginning, the appropriate parts and a conclusion but which does not have anything to do with communication or discovery; it is void of ideas (p. 85).

ESL Writers

Advertisements can be particularly effective in teaching foreign students. Many advertisements can only be understood by Americans, since advertising appeals to a specific cultural bias. Such ads are ineffective when shown to some ESL students. However, other ads have universal appeal. Students can be asked to collect ads that contain examples of the concepts being taught in class, idioms, and figurative language.

Using ads in the ESL writing class also lends itself to collaborative learning, especially where students may view American culture "as permissive, lawless, and hostile, and where ESL students tend to withdraw" (p. Diaz 20). Working with partners can facilitate learning, cultural exchange, and the acquisition of English.

ESL students tend to compare and contrast, anyway, because they have come from a culture that is different from the American way of life in many ways, and they are accustomed to evaluating different aspects of their "new" life (Diaz pp. 22-23). Teaching ESL students the various writing strategies (comparison and contrast, persuasion, description) is a matter of channeling their natural tendencies to critique their surroundings. Since ads convey persuasive information to the general population, their messages are easier to decipher than, for example, an essay written with complex sentence structure, subordinate clauses, and relative pronouns.

Sources

Ads can be found in magazines, daily newspapers, on television and radio, and in the mail. The writing class instructor has an endless supply of material to reinforce the curriculum of a particular class, be that errors in grammar or fallacies in logic, structure of argument, etc. For example, some popular ads contain purposeful errors in grammar and punctuation simply to address a particular audience. Last year Nike aired a one-minute spot featuring the sports legend Bo Jackson successfully competing in

various competitions. The slogan was, "Bo don't know Diddley!" Similar errors in grammar and mechanics can easily be found by leafing through popular magazines.

To generate brainstorming and conversation in class, ads for a similar product can be compared across various magazines and newspapers. For example, automobile ads in Sports Illustrated and Fortune Magazine appeal to two distinct audiences. Students are asked to exercise their critical thinking skills as they compare the advertising approaches that companies take to appeal to various groups of consumers.

Collecting television ads is a difficult process for the instructor or student. However, students can be asked to write down the dialogue and describe the setting, much as a screenwriter does. In fact, students who are determined to transcribe a certain ad become adept at predicting when the target ad will appear on television by analyzing the audience. For instance, ads differ markedly, depending on the programs for which they are being broadcast (compare commercials shown during the coverage of sporting events, the business week in review and family situation comedies). Students exercise critical thinking skills as they predict what type of ad will occur at various times of the day on television. However, not all students have access to a TV; some of those who do, do not have the time to watch television. Therefore, television viewing cannot be made a requirement of the class.

Students who wish to compare radio advertisements are limited by memory, since the ads are short and aural. However, such ads can be transcribed and analyzed in the writing class.

Analyzing Layout

Describing the appearance of advertisements is another possible writing exercise that teachers might want to utilize in their classes. Some ads appeal to the "reader" who will carefully comb through the print for specific information, while others are eye-catching because of the colors or images in the pictures. For example, ads for sporting equipment in sports magazines will contain many more details than a similar ad in a fashion or investment magazine.

Other factors to consider include the placement of the ad in the magazine. Some ads occur continuously, page after page, like chapters in a story; such a layout reinforces the attributes of the product in the reader's mind. Moreover, ads for certain products may follow a particular article in a magazine; an article on a dramatic weight loss may be immediately followed by an ad for a dieting product. Colors also influence the impressions readers get from viewing an ad. For example, menthol cigarette ads contain images of fresh air (snow, oceans, sailboats) to reinforce the idea of "freshness." By analyzing the layout of ads, students discover subtle images created by skillful advertising professionals.

CONCLUSION

Using advertisements in the writing classroom is not a substitute for a textbook; however, the personal writing students

do in reaction to analyzing ads encourages them to find their "voice." Studies of task requirements in regular college classrooms (Mlynarczyk p. 19) reveal that many instructors assign personal writing, realizing that students will have different interpretations of events according to their background knowledge. However, "only when students have a chance to find their own voice by writing about subjects that have immediate importance in their lives can we expect them to write with authority about something more abstract" (Mlynarczyk p. 19). For the instructor seeking a different approach to fostering discussion, writing, and critical thinking in the writing class, advertisements "GET RESULTS."

RESOURCES

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